



## Enthymema XXII 2018

### An Essay of Self-criticism of the Russian *Intelligencija*: Language, Literature, History

Irina A. Maidanskaya and Maksim A. Maidansky  
Belgorod State University

**Abstract** – Review of the book: Klimova, S.M. *Intelligencija v poiskach identichnosti: Dostoevsky – Tolstoy*. SAleteja, 2018.

**Keywords** – Intelligencija; Dostoevsky; Lev Tolstoy; Strachov; the Russian idea; philosophy of life.

Maidanskaya, Irina A. and Maksim A. Maidansky. "An Essay of Self-criticism of the Russian *Intelligencija*: Language, Literature, History". *Enthymema*, n. XXII, 2018, pp. 263-67.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/11070>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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ISSN 2037-2426

# An Essay of Self-criticism of the Russian *Intelligencija*: Language, Literature, History

Irina A. Maidanskaya and Maksim A. Maidansky  
Belgorod State University

When reading the monograph by Svetlana Klimova, it is necessary to understand clearly what is its real subject. In Russian, the word *intelligencija* has shades of meanings that make it difficult to translate it into foreign languages. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, intellectual workers and simply enlightened, cultured people began to be called *intelligencija*. However, this word soon obtained ethical and even ideological connotations. A critical attitude to Russian authorities and to the social order became the distinctive feature of *intelligencija*.

*Intelligenty* considered their moral duty to represent the interests of people before the authorities and take care of public enlightenment. But *intelligenty* often poorly understood the mindset of peasants, who were the majority of the population at that time, and peasants did not like such rude interference in their age-old everyday life. The words *intelligencija* and *intelligent* received among the people a tinge of contempt. It is found even in abusive idioms, such as ‘rotten *intelligencija*’ or ‘lousy *intelligent*.’ But the adjective *intelligentnyj* has no such connotations at all; it is practically synonymous with the word ‘cultured.’

Isaiah Berlin, one of the most knowledgeable Western scholars of Russian culture, noted that an analogue of the Russian *intelligencija* in the Western world can be found only in the field of religious life.

The concept of intelligentsia must not be confused with the notion of intellectuals. Its members thought of themselves as united by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceived themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude to life, something like a gospel. (117)

Klimova focuses attention precisely on this quasi-religious nature of the Russian *intelligencija*. The place of God in *intelligencija*’s consciousness was taken by *Narod* (the People), but the perception of the world, the pathos, and even the language remained religious, and imaginative literature became a new Scripture.

Thus, *intelligencija* is not so much a sociological concept, but rather an ideological one. *Intelligencija* includes only and solely those whose knowledge fits into the new “religious discourse” described above. The remaining mass of educated people, including physicians, teachers, and «all Russian *raznočinye*» (51), is deleted from *intelligencija*. It is necessary to remember that while reading the reviewed monograph, otherwise its anti-*intelligencija* pathos will be incomprehensible.

Klimova’s criticism of *intelligencija*’s «binary myth-consciousness» implies that she regards her own theoretical platform as strictly realistic or, at least, not mythological. Further we will try to point out its basic principles and value reference points. Now it would be enough to state the fact that the line of demarcation between the *intelligencija* and the rest of Russian society is conducted within the field of consciousness, and not within people’s practical life. However, the latter occasionally emerges in Klimova’s research, too.

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The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, “The Formation of the Russian *Intelligencija*,” a demanding analysis of the history of this social stratum, with its «pendulum self-awareness», is given. The second part anatomizes the ‘Russian idea’ in the works of Dostoevsky. The third part paves the path from Nikolaj Strachov to Lev Tolstoy, whose position, by and large, elicits Klimova’s fervent approval. And the largest fourth part is devoted to the philosophical ideas of Tolstoy. Sympathetic insights into his worldview are supplemented by correcting the mistakes of «*intelligencija*’s perception» of Tolstoy’s works and comparing his social and political doctrine with the views of Max Weber and Hannah Arendt.

Klimova inherited the ideological definition of the *intelligencija*, as well as the negative-critical attitude towards it, from the authors of the well-known collection *Vekhi* (1909) – the Tolstoyist Michail Gershenzon, the ex-Marxists Nikolaj Berdyaev, Pëtr Struve, et al. The structuralist concept of the Tartu semiotic school (Yuryj Lotman, Boris Uspenskij) and the ‘dialogical’ theory of culture of M.M. Bakhtin became other supporting points in her work.

The emergence of *intelligencija* is usually associated with the reforms of Peter the Great, which created the layer of ‘Russian Europeans.’ Over most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, up to A.N. Radishchev, intellectuals did not enter into open ideological confrontation with the authorities of the country. On the pages of the journal of the Russian Academy *The Companion of Amateurs of the Russian Word*, the writer Dmitrij Fonvizin respectfully inquired Catherine II about the lamentable state of morals in Russia. Indigestible questions about laws and human rights were declined in a somewhat haughty manner. Klimova regards this dialogue as «a model of a successful intellectual discussion of the *intelligencija* with the authorities» (26).

Half a century later, *intelligencija* moved from questions to answers, and the authorities did not like the answers. The publication of Pëtr Chaadaev’s first *Philosophical Letter* (1836) marked the beginning of a heated public discussion about «our specific civilization», on which the «global education of the human race did not extend». «A healthy moral existence is impossible» here, and the whole Russian history is only an eternal «flat stagnation», as Chaadaev sadly recorded. In response, the authorities did not find anything better than to declare Chaadaev insane, putting him under house arrest.

According to Klimova, in such a way a special discourse of *intelligencija* was born. It is characterized by: (i) irreconcilable opposition to the authorities; (ii) a posture of the prophet, convinced of his moral and intellectual superiority over the enemy; (iii) the perception of society through the prism of binary oppositions ‘progressive or reactionary,’ ‘old or new,’ ‘friend or foe,’ with periodic inversion of values; (iv) the romantic cult of the revolution, on the one hand, and the cult of religion, on the other.

At the same time, the ‘dialogical’ discourse is being formed, in which Klimova sees an alternative to the discourse of *intelligencija*. In this regard, she emphasizes

the new role of ‘intimate genres’: diaries, correspondences, autobiographies that demonstrated the process of birth of a writer, thinker, public figure or creative person [...] They reveal the dialogical space of a personal world, documenting the spontaneous process of birth, development and change of thought in the context of subjective emotional experience. Intimacy and sincerity became the basis for the formation of an integral person. (43)

Leo Tolstoy becomes the leader of the ‘dialogists’. The key terms of this new discourse are ‘whole,’ ‘holistic,’ ‘integrity,’ etc.

Klimova ardently supports the party of ‘dialogic’ intellectuals in their opposition to the ‘monologic’ *intelligencija*. She approves the «ideal of a holistic person as the unity of logic and faith», understood in the spirit of Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky (46). Meanwhile, if we delve deeper into this and similar projects of the Russian religious philosophers – the advocates of ‘all-round mind’ (Aleksey Khomyakov), ‘comprehensive knowledge’ (Vladimir Solovyov), ‘integral cognition’ (Vassily Rozanov), – one can see that all of them begin and end with a

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statement of the priority of 'heart' in relation to 'reason,' and with a subjection of all rational forms of thought to religious faith, intuition, moral feeling and affective 'sympathies.' It is not Leonardo or Spinoza who serves as a model of the holistic person, but some hermit 'elders' from the *Optina Pustyn'* monastery.

Dostoevsky and Tolstoy also place religion at the forefront. These two Russian writers «become the main inspirers of the future *bogoiskatel'stvo* (God-seeking), making religious problems pivotal in public life and in the thought of *intelligencija*» (69).

However, as Klimova asserts, Dostoevsky did not manage to go beyond the scopes of *intelligencija*'s myth-making. Eventually, he became an «apologist of Russian nationalism» and «tried with all his might to defend the monarchy and traditional Orthodoxy» (being a faithful Tolstoyan, Klimova feels deep hostility toward the state and church).

In the monograph, Dostoevsky generally bifurcates. Klimova is trying to separate «Dostoevsky as an author», who delights her, from «Dostoevsky as a person», moralizing, arbitrarily interpreting facts and creating ideological myths. In Dostoevsky's novels, Klimova finds «attractive religious ideas and symbols», however she is repelled by his «commitment to the Russian Orthodox church, to its values and rites» (76).

In principle, the duality of the figure of Dostoevsky is well known. In this connection, Klimova herself refers to the authoritative opinion of Georgij Florovsky, who believed that Dostoevsky could not carry out the 'final synthesis' of his ideas; he got stuck in antinomies, like Kant. There are two layers in Dostoevsky's Russian idea: the first layer is a myth of the Russian people, to whom God entrusted the mission of saving the world, and the second layer is the image of enemy, viz. a Western bourgeois man brought up in 'Jewry'.

It is curious that a similar assessment of Western civilization was proposed a little earlier by Marx on the pages of the *German-French Yearbook* (1844). The young Hegelian philosopher discovers in Western Christianity the embodiment of the Jewish spirit of haggling. Civil society becomes the culmination of historical development of the spirit of Jewry; it is the «sphere of egoism, where *bellum omnium contra omnes* reigns». Like Dostoevsky, Marx seeks the savoir of mankind, but he finds him within the Western civilization itself. It is the proletariat, the class-messiah, which is called upon to emancipate man.

Dostoevsky began his literary career with depicting the life of proletarians, of the 'poor people'. Such is the Russian people, such is its mystical nature – the 'Russian idea.' On the other hand, the West is represented inside the Russian society in the form of *intelligencija*, with its 'rational-scientific' views and critical mindset, reaching the complete denial of common human values among nihilists. Like the Jews, Russian *intelligenty* are strangers in their own country. They are cut off from the national soil and hostile to the religious spirit of the Russian people. The religion of *intelligenty* is socialism. These Jews of the Russian world sold Christ for a lentil pottage of civilization. Striving to transform the material life of society, they forget about personality and 'living love', as Klimova argues

To love everyone without having a drop of love for real parents, a woman, a child, for some 'blade of grass' is a terrible metamorphosis of Russian 'sufferers,' and it is the source of all socialist ideas. (83)

This 'binary' notion of socialism, as a love for all together and to no one in particular, is not original. In that place Klimova appeals to Semën Frank (another author of the *Vekhi* volume), but many and many critics of socialism asserted the same thing. Christian thinkers considered themselves to be monopolists regarding the 'living love'. They did not find 'a drop of love' for the real human person in their opponents – not only in Narodniks and Marxists, but also in anarchists, such as Michail Bakunin, Pëtr Kropotkin and the army of their adherents.

Klimova believes that only Dostoevsky and Tolstoy showed us the 'living love' in all its richness and diversity of its manifestations. In her book, she rarely refers to artistic images,

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depicted in the novels of the Russian writers. Much more attention is paid to their correspondence, diaries and other 'intimate' writings. A large paragraph is devoted to Leo Tolstoy's 'philosophical dialogue' with the literary critic Nikolai Strachov. The latter professionally engaged in philosophy, translated the multivolume *History of Modern Philosophy* by Kuno Fisher, the works of H. Taine, E. Renan, and other European thinkers that were popular at the time. But Strachov himself wrote a lot of philosophical works as well. In one of them, his thought even tried to embrace "The World as a Whole" (the title of his book of 1872).

Klimova regards Tolstoy's correspondence with Strachov as a starting point of the religious and philosophical turn occurred in the creative work of Tolstoy. Here the basic ideas that he preached in the last three decades of his life were gradually crystallizing. For Tolstoy, Strachov became the «co-author of understanding» – the interlocutor, the 'Other,' who helped in elaborating a 'new philosophy of life'. The pose of venerate student, in which Strachov appears in the correspondence, is in fact

a manifestation of Strachov's ability to understand. It is another unique manifestation of the creative nature of personality [...]. Empathy for the other is also a 'kind' of cohesion, without which neither dialogue nor integrity is possible [...]. It seems to me that it is precisely this ability would be defined later by M.M. Bakhtin as 'sympathetic understanding'. (134)

Tolstoy showed somewhat less sympathy for Strachov's views, subjecting *The World as a Whole* to sharp criticism for ignoring the religious and moral principle of the world and misunderstanding of the meaning of human existence. But here Klimova replies that it is rather Tolstoy himself who misunderstood the hidden religious core of the Strachov's book.

Klimova sees the specificity of Tolstoy's philosophy of life in subjectivism. This feature distinctly separates his teaching from the congenial Western (of the Enlightenment Age, first of all) and Oriental philosophies. The feeling of life – 'I am living' – precedes every possible experience and is a necessary precondition of its very possibility. With its subjectivity, this feeling is inherent in every person and in all living things altogether. It forms the foundation of the «kingdom of God within us», as Tolstoy says.

In the epistemological aspect, Klimova makes efforts to draw a border between the rational and the mystical components in Tolstoy's philosophy, without losing its inner integrity. The essence of Tolstoy's socio-historical views is clarified well by drawing parallels with Max Weber (on the principle of 'religious rationality') and Hannah Arendt (the origins of evil and the ethics of duty).

Within the limits of a review it is impossible, of course, to trace all the interesting moves of the author's thought. It remains only to wish here that the new book of Svetlana Klimova would find its interested reader. No doubt, her book has made a major contribution to the 'sympathetic understanding' of Tolstoy's philosophy.

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